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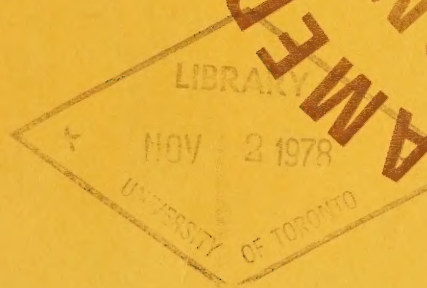
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ALCOHOLISM

A MERRY-GO-ROUND NAMED DENIAL/By Joseph L. Kellermann

A person must have the help of at least one other person to become an alcoholic. He cannot become one by himself. Alcoholism cannot appear in a person apart from others, get worse without the help of others, or continue in isolation from other people.

When a person drinks too much and gets drunk, other people react to this kind of drinking and its results by blaming him. The drinker responds to their reaction with denial, and continues to drink. The downward spiral of this merry-go-round of blame and denial is what we call alcoholism. We can look at alcoholism as a tragic three-act play in which there are at least four characters: the *alcoholic*, the *enabler*, the *victim*, and the *provocatrice*.

To look at the alcoholic, to read a scientific description of alcoholism, or to listen to the tales of woe and troubles of the family alone is only a small part of the drama. To understand alcoholism, we must look at the illness of the alcoholic as if we were sitting in the audience watching a play and observing very carefully the roles of all the actors. *Denial* is the name of the play because it is the key word in alcoholism. Again and again the actors do what they say they will not do, or deny what they have done. If we could watch the action on television with the sound off, we could understand much better what is really happening.

The *alcoholic* is the star of the first act. He does all the acting, while the others react to what he does. Usually, he is a male between the ages of 30 and 55, smart, skillful, and often very successful in some area of work; but his goal may be far above his ability, or his performance far below. We see also that he is a very sensitive, lonely, and tense person. He acts in a very independent way in order to deny that he is very dependent. At the same time he denies that he is responsible for the results of his independent action. However, if others did not permit this kind of action, he would not be able to act this way.

The alcoholic has learned that the use of alcohol makes him feel better. To him it is a blessing, not a curse. From his point of view, it is a medicine, not a poison. Alcohol melts his fears, reduces his tension, removes his loneliness, and solves all his problems—for the time being. For a few hours, it floats his troubles while he rests. For him, at the moment, it is the answer to all his problems.

Joseph Kellermann, an Episcopalian minister, is director of the Charlotte (North Carolina) Council on Alcoholism. This article was reprinted in Addictions with permission from Inventory, a journal on alcohol and alcoholism published quarterly by the North Carolina Department of Mental Health (Vol. 19, No. 2, Fall, 1969).

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ACT I

As the play opens, the alcoholic says: "No one ever tells *me* what to do—I tell *them*." And this is true, especially in the family. Talking becomes difficult. Even when the drinking and its results are causing serious problems that everyone can see, the alcoholic will not discuss them. Talking is a one-way street. No one, on either side, seems to hear what the others are saying.

Early in the first act the alcoholic needs a drink, so he takes one. He drinks more than others, more often than others, and—above all—it means far more to him than to others. He consumes his pain-killer at a rapid pace in large amounts, rather than slowly and easily. He may drink openly; but, more likely, he will hide the amount he drinks by not drinking when the other actors in the play are around.

Hiding the amount he drinks is the beginning of denial, and when we see him do this it proves that he knows he is drinking too much. Drinking too much is not a matter of choice with him but, too often, the first sign of alcoholism. His repeated denial by hiding the bottle and drinking alone tells us that he cannot stop drinking after one or two drinks, and it tells us how important alcohol is to him in making him "feel better."

After the alcoholic has had a few drinks, we see a profound change in him. Alcohol gives him a sense of success, well-being, and self-sufficiency. It puts him on top of the world, and he acts as if he were a little god. He is now right, and all others are wrong—particularly if anyone objects to his drinking. There is no one thing that all alcoholics do, but while intoxicated or drunk they are not rational or sensible or responsible. They ignore the rules of social conduct and, at times, are criminal in their activity—of which "driving under the influence" is a clear example. If a sober person acted this way, we would say he was insane.

If drinking continues long enough the alcoholic creates a crisis, gets into trouble, or ends up in a mess. Although there are many paths he may take to this end, the action is always the same: a dependent person acts as if he were completely independent; he drinks to convince himself that this is true, but the results of his drinking prove the opposite by making him completely dependent upon others.

When he ends up in a mess he either waits for something to happen, ignores it, walks away from it, or cries for someone to get him out of it. Alcohol, which first gave him a sense of being successful and independent, now has stripped him of his costume of independence and we see him as a helpless, dependent child.

ACT II

In the second act, three other characters play out their roles, and the alcoholic receives the benefit of their action. The alcoholic himself does little or nothing but wait for, and expect, others to do things for him.

The first character to appear is the *enabler*. He is a guilt-laden Mr. Clean, whose own anxiety and guilt will not let him endure the condition of his friend the alcoholic. He sets up a rescue mission to save the alcoholic from the crisis or get him out of trouble because he, the enabler, cannot bear the pressure of the situation. He is meeting his own need rather than the need of the alcoholic. As a rule, the enabler is a male outside the family, but at times this role is played by a member of the family or by a woman outside.

Professionally, the role of enabler is played by ministers, doctors, lawyers, and social workers, who have not had adequate instruction or education on the subject of alcohol or alcoholism. These members of the so-called helping professions act in the same way as friends by denying the alcoholic the right to learn by correcting his own mistakes.

This trains him to believe that there will always be a protector who will come to the rescue, despite the fact that each time they do it the enablers insist they will never rescue him again. They always have, and the alcoholic believes they always will. Rescue operations may become just as compulsive to enablers as drinking is to the alcoholic.

The next character to come on stage is the *victim*, who may be the boss, the employer, the foreman or supervisor, the commanding officer in military life, a business partner, or, at times, a key employee. The victim is the person who is responsible for getting the work done if the alcoholic is absent because of drinking or is half on and half off the job because of a hangover.

By the time drinking interferes with a man's job he has usually been working for the same company for 10 or 15 years, and his boss has become a very real friend. Protection of the employee is a perfectly normal thing, and there is always the hope that "this will be the last time." Yet, without repeated protection and covering up by the victim, the alcoholic would have to give up his drinking or give up his job. The victim's role is to enable the alcoholic to continue drinking in an irresponsible way and keep his job at the same time.

The third character in this act is the key person in the play; the wife or mother of the alcoholic—the woman with whom he lives. Since she is usually the wife, we recognize that she is a veteran at her role because she has played it much longer than other persons in the cast. For lack of a better term we call her the *provocatrice*—the female provoker.

She is hurt, upset, and provoked by the repeated drinking episodes of the alcoholic, but she holds the family together despite all the trouble caused by the drinking. In turn she feeds back into her marriage the bitterness, resentment, fear, and hurt she feels, and she becomes a source of provocation. She controls, tries to force the thing she wants, sacrifices, adjusts, never gives up, never gives in, and never forgets.

Another name for this character might be the adjuster, for she is constantly adjusting to the crises and trouble caused by drinking and its results. The attitude of the alcoholic is one that allows failure on his part, but she must never fail him. He acts in complete independence, insisting that he will do as he pleases, while she must do exactly what he tells her to do. For instance, she must be at home when he arrives—if he arrives. He blames her for everything that goes wrong within the home and the marriage, and she does everything possible to try to make the marriage work, to prove that this is not true.

A woman by tradition is wife and housekeeper, and may earn part of the bread. If she lives with a man whose illness is alcoholism, she attempts to be nurse, doctor, and counsellor. She cannot play these three roles without hurting herself and her husband. She is so upset by what has happened that she cannot even talk to him without adding more guilt, bitterness, resentment, or hostility to the situation—which is almost unbearable as it is.

Yet everything in our present society trains and conditions the wife to play this role. If she does not, she finds herself going against what family and society think the role of wife is. No matter what the alcoholic does, he ends up at home—for this is where everyone goes when there is no other place to go.

Act II is now played out in full. The results, effects, and problems caused by the alcoholic's drinking have been removed. The mess he made is now cleaned up. He has been rescued, put back on the job, and restored as a member of the family. He again wears the costume of a responsible adult. But since all this was done *for* him and not *by* him, his dependence is increased; he is still a child in an adult suit.

Even the painful results of drinking were suffered by persons other than the drinker, and thus drinking is permitted to become a very effective problem-solving method for the alcoholic. In Act I the alcoholic killed all his pain and woe by getting drunk, and in Act II the trouble and painful results of drinking are removed by other people. This teaches him that he may act in an irresponsible way.

ACT III

The third act begins in much the same manner as Act I, but something has been added by the action of the first and second acts. The alcoholic's need to deny his dependence is now greater. He expresses it almost at once in a louder and stronger fashion. He denies that he has a drinking problem, that he is an alcoholic, that alcohol is causing him any trouble. He denies that anyone helped him. He denies that he may lose his job, and insists that he is the best person at his job.

Above all he denies that he has caused his family any trouble. In fact he blames his family—especially his wife—for all the fuss, nagging, and problems that exist. He insists that she is crazy, that she needs to see a psychiatrist. In more than half the cases, as the illness and conflict get worse, the husband begins to accuse the wife of having affairs with other men—when he knows this is not true.

There are some alcoholics who achieve the same denial by refusing to discuss anything related to their drinking. The memory of it is too painful. Often the alcoholic permits the other members of his family to discuss what *they* did wrong and what *they* failed to do, whether he was drunk or sober. The wife never forgets what her husband does. The husband may not remember what he did when he was drunk, but he never forgets what his wife tells him he did or failed to do.

The real problem is that the alcoholic knows much of the truth that he so strongly denies. He is aware of his drunkenness. He is aware of his failure. His guilt and remorse become so unbearable that he cannot tolerate criticism or advice from others. Above all, his memory of his utter helplessness and failure at the end of the first act is more than embarrassing; it is excruciatingly painful for a man who thinks and acts as if he were a little god in his own world.

In time, the family adjusts to their way of living together. The alcoholic may deny that he will ever drink again, and others in the play give similar promises: the enabler, that he will never again come to the rescue; the victim, that he will not allow another job failure due to drinking; the provocatrice, whether wife or mother, that they cannot continue to live together under these conditions.

What is said is completely different from what everyone has done and will do again. The enabler, the victim, and the provocatrice have all said these things before, but did not act them out. The result of this ambivalence, however, has been to increase the sense of guilt and failure of the alcoholic, challenge his god-like attitude, and add to his heavy burden of tension and loneliness. If this mental pain becomes unbearable—especially if it is made so by the attitudes and actions of other members of the cast—he will drink again.

It is certain that the alcoholic in Act III will drink again if Act II is played out as described, for he has learned by chance or experience that this is the one and only certain means of removing pain, overcoming his guilt and sense of failure, solving all problems, and recovering a sense of worth and value. The memory of the immediate comfort and benefits of drinking blot out the knowledge of what will happen if he drinks. Also, there is always in the back of his mind the hope that this time he can control his drinking and get the great benefits from it that he once did. So, what seems absolutely necessary to the alcoholic occurs. He takes another drink.

When he takes the drink, the play does not come to an end. The curtain closed at the end of Act I and Act II, but at the end of Act III the play suddenly returns to the first act without the curtain closing. It is like watching a three-reel continuous-play movie that runs without stopping at any point. If the audience remains seated long enough, all three acts will be played out again in the same way and, at the end of Act III, the alcoholic will start to drink again. As the years go by the actors in the play get older, but there is little change in the words or the action of the drama.

If the first two acts are played as described, then Act III will follow in the same way. Without Act I, of course, the play about alcoholism would have no beginning and the drama surrounding it would not exist. This leaves Act II as the only act in which the tragic drama of alcoholism can be changed—the only act in which recovery can be initiated by the decisions and actions of persons other than the alcoholic.

The key to this fact is that in Act II the alcoholic accepts what is done for him by others, who do these things for him either by choice or because they cannot resist doing them. Act II has the real potential to break the downward spiral of alcoholism and its merry-go-round of denial.

It is completely untrue to state that an alcoholic cannot be helped until he wants help. However, we can truthfully state that there is almost no chance that the alcoholic will stop drinking as long as other people help him keep on drinking by removing all the painful consequences of drinking.

The actors in the second act kept asking the alcoholic why he did not stop drinking, and yet they were the very persons whose actions helped him solve his problems by drinking in this way. If the alcoholic is rescued from every crisis, if the boss allows himself to be victimized again and again, and if the wife reacts as a provoker, there is not one chance in ten that he will recover. The alcoholic is virtually helpless, locked in by his illness. He cannot break the lock by himself, but neither can he keep the merry-go-round going unless others ride it with him and help him keep it going.

A planned recovery from alcoholism must begin with the actors in the second act, who hold the key to the lock. If they succeed in breaking the lock, or removing it, the alcoholic is free to come out. These actors cannot demand that the alcoholic give up drinking as a means of solving his problems, but they may be able to help him recover if they learn how to break his dependence on them by refusing to give in to him.

To do this they must learn how people affect each other in this illness, and they must learn to act in an entirely different fashion. The latter is the more difficult part. New roles can be learned by turning to others who understand the play, and putting into practice the insight and knowledge gained from these sources.

The people in the second act will find it painful and very difficult to change. It will be much easier and far less painful for them to keep on saying that "the alcoholic cannot be helped" than to go through the pain and agony of learning to play new roles. However, if Act II is rewritten and replayed, there is every reason to believe that the alcoholic will recover.

The enablers and the victim must seek information, insight, and understanding if they plan to change their roles. It is usually necessary for the wife or mother, provocatrice, to become active in a program of counselling and therapy if she is to make a basic change in her life.

In trying to understand the roles of the three supporting actors in this drama, we must remember that they did not learn them overnight. These people play the role that they think is expected of them; they have been taught by others to act in this way. They think they are helping the alcoholic, and do not know that they are perpetuating the illness and making it virtually impossible for the alcoholic to recover.

Friends who are enablers think they must not let the alcoholic suffer the consequences of his drunken behavior when they can be so easily removed by a simple rescue operation. They feel that this is something that simply must be done—like trying to save a drowning man. The rescue mission relieves their fear, guilt, and conscience. It also conveys to the alcoholic what the enabler is really thinking: "You cannot make it without my help." This thought reveals a lack of faith in the alcoholic's ability to take care of himself, and is a form of judgment and condemnation.

The most destructive aspect of the role of the professional enabler—minister, doctor, lawyer, and social worker—is that the family is trained and conditioned to reduce the crisis rather than use it to start a recovery program. By the time the alcoholic begins using professional enablers, the family has known for five to 10 years that drinking is a serious problem—even though this fact was not visible to people outside the family.

During this earlier period of alcoholism, before the alcoholic behavior can be seen by outside persons, the family is told by professional persons that the drinker is not an alcoholic and, even if he were, there is nothing they can do unless he actually wants help. Later, when alcoholism reaches the point of outside visibility and the alcoholic turns to professional persons for help, they respond by reducing the crisis.

This is what happens. When alcoholism is in the early stages the family is told that there are no signs of alcoholism. Then, when it becomes visible the family is taught that the way to deal with it is to remove the symptoms and results rather than come to grips with the problem. They learn this when the professional persons who failed to identify alcoholism in its earlier stages treat the more advanced symptoms by reducing the crisis.

This kind of help and treatment does not lead to recovery. On the contrary, it makes the illness chronic, helps the alcoholic get back on the merry-go-round, and teaches the family again and again that "nothing can be done to cope with alcoholism." When the family is forced to accept the existence of a serious drinking problem, to admit that it is alcoholism, and to turn to professional persons for help for themselves and for the alcoholic, the professional person acts out the role of enabler instead of leading the family and the alcoholic into a long-range program of recovery.

The victim does not get on the merry-go-round until the alcoholic has been working for many years. Large industrial firms have discovered that when alcoholism begins to interfere with a man's work he has been employed for 10, 15, or 20 years in most cases. The foreman protects his alcoholic friend, knowing he has a wife and children who will suffer if the man is fired.

This is especially true if there is no company policy to help alcoholics recover. Fellow workers also protect the alcoholic's job because this man is their friend. Personal interest and friendship cause the victim to do for the alcoholic things that increase his dependence and add to his need for denial.

The wife, or provocatrice, is the first person who joins the alcoholic on the merry-go-round. If she absorbs injustices, suffers deprivation, endures repeated embarrassments, accept broken promises, is overthrown or undermined in every effort to cope with the drinking situation, and is beaten by the constant expression of hostility directed towards her, she will automatically feed back into the marriage her own reaction of hostility, bitterness, anxiety, and anger. Playing the role of provocatrice in this way makes the wife sick.

She is not a sick woman who forces her husband to become an alcoholic, but a woman who becomes part of an illness by living with it. She is put in a role which encourages her to become a female provoker, the provocatrice. She is caught between the advancing illness of alcoholism and the wall of ignorance, shame, and embarrassment inflicted upon her by society. This crushes her, and she needs information and counselling—not because she caused her husband's illness, but because she is being destroyed by it. This, in turn, hurts the alcoholic and greatly reduces his chance of recovery.

Another reason why the wife needs help in the plan of recovery is that she will discover she is standing alone if she changes her role and begins to act in a new way. Other members of the cast will treat her as an actor who has deserted a play when there is no understudy to take her part. This is especially true if the wife separates from her husband, whether by choice or by necessity.

Some wives can change their role after having a few talks with a counsellor who has some basic knowledge of alcoholism, or by attending group meetings in a local alcoholism clinic or mental-health clinic. Others gain insight and security by taking part in Al-Anon or family group meetings.

Having new friends who understand her new role—because they have lived through the pain and agony of their own change—is very important to the wife at this time. As relatives and old friends begin to tell her how wrong she is in trying to play a new role, the wife needs people who understand the situation and can give moral support in her search for answers to the problems of alcoholism.

The most basic mistake made by women who seek help for their husbands' alcoholism is that they want to be told what they can do to stop the drinking, without realizing that it may take months or a year or two for them to learn a new role in the alcoholic marriage. Six months of regular weekly conferences or group meetings are often necessary before a wife begins to change her feelings and learns to act in a new way. If others in the play do not learn new roles, the wife may need to remain in the group for a period of two or three years before her feelings and emotions will permit a change in role.

The wife enters into this activity of seeking help for herself because she needs this help to recover from her own fears, anxieties, resentments, and other destructive forces at work in an alcoholic marriage. As she is able to change, this may change the drinking pattern of her husband, and in many cases such a change leads to recovery on the part of the alcoholic. Few husbands can stand a drastic change in their wives without making basic changes in their own lives, but this desirable result cannot be guaranteed. Many wives seek some form of help and then drop out of a program when the problems of their alcoholic marriages are not solved in a short time.

If there are children in the family with an alcoholic husband, the wife must seek help outside the family or the circle of her own friends if she is to avoid injury to the children. Playing the role of provocatrice places the children between a sick father and a sick mother. The wife who seeks and finds help early enough can prevent much of the harm that is being passed on to the children through her reaction to her husband. The wife who plays the role of provocatrice for the sake of the children is hurting them rather than helping them.

The wife must first seek help for herself. If she finds this help, it will protect the children in many ways and may open the door to her husband's recovery—which otherwise might not occur. The rate of recovery increases greatly when the wife seeks help for herself and continues to use this help while seeking additional help for her husband.

Morally, no one has a right to play God by demanding that the alcoholic stop drinking. The reverse is also true. The alcoholic must have a supporting cast so that he can act as if he were a little god by telling everyone what to do while he does as he pleases. The wife has every moral right and responsibility to refuse to act as if her husband were God Almighty whose every wish and commandment she must obey.

As a rule she cannot tell her husband anything, because he refuses to hear it. Her only effective means of telling him what she means is to learn to act in freedom from his attempt to control and dictate what she is to do. Since this control may be exercised in silence and need not be expressed in words, the real message to the wife is what the husband does, not what he says. This is why she, too, must learn to act in a new way so that he will get her message.

Two things prevent most wives from remaining in long-range programs. First, the husband's attitude towards the new role may range from disapproval to direct threats or violence. Second, responsibilities in the home, particularly if there are young children, make it very difficult for the wife to leave the home for group meetings, counselling, or therapy during the day. At night few alcoholic husbands will baby-sit or pay for this service while the wife attends meetings of Al-Anon.

If the couple married at an average age—during the pre-alcoholic stage of his illness—the wife is the first person who joins him on the merry-go-round when alcoholism appears. It is not until many years later that the enabler and the victim start their roles. Therefore, if recovery from alcoholism is to be initiated before the illness becomes crucial or acute, the wife must initiate the recovery program. Since most people today, including the helping professionals, are unwilling to accept alcoholism as an illness until it reaches the addictive stage of chronic alcoholism, the wife will find herself in the position of a pioneer in the search for help.

If her minister condemns drunkenness, she is ashamed to turn to him. If her doctor fails to recognize the existence of alcoholism in the early stages, medical help and counsel for her are cut off. If conditions become unbearable and she consults a lawyer, he may talk in terms of separation or divorce as the only real service he can offer. This increases her sense of failure as a wife, or terrifies her with immediate feelings of anxiety and grief—reactions she would have if she took such action. Therefore, most wives stay on the merry-go-round, or get back on soon after trying to get off.

Until there are drastic changes in our cultural and social attitudes towards drinking and alcoholism, the wife or family member who wishes to initiate a process of recovery from alcoholism must understand that it can be a long and difficult undertaking. However, since she cannot make such a moral choice unless she believes it to be right, she must understand the nature of alcoholism in order to make it.

We cannot expect the wife to do what is beyond her emotional or financial capacity. However, if she (or some other family member) is willing to enter into a weekly program of education, therapy, Al-Anon, or counselling, and work at it for a period of at least six months, changes usually occur not only in her life but often in the life and action of the alcoholic.

She must also have the courage to stand against her husband's initial opposition and effort to destroy her own program of recovery, if he takes this position. By remaining in a program of her own for months or even a year or two, she may be able to solve problems which at first seemed too difficult to try.

There is no easy way to stop the merry-go-round, because it is more painful, at that particular time, to stop it than to keep it going. To spell out definite rules that apply to all members of the cast is impossible. Each case is different, but the framework of the play remains the same. The wife or family member is able to see the merry-go-round of the alcoholic, but often fails to see that she is the one who provides the help that keeps it going.

The hardest part of stopping the repeated cycle is overcoming the family member's fear that the alcoholic won't make it without such help, even though it is the kind of help that permits him to continue to use alcohol as the cure-all for his problems of life.

If a friend is called upon for help, he should use the occasion as an opportunity to lead the alcoholic and the family into a planned program of recovery. The professional person who has alcoholics or their family members as clients or patients should learn how to cope with alcoholism. Specific literature is available through local, state or provincial, and national programs on alcoholism. Short, intensive workshops are also available for professional persons who are willing to spend time and effort learning the basic facts about alcoholism.

If a wife thinks her husband has a drinking problem or drinks too much too often, she should seek help and counsel immediately for the purpose of evaluating the situation. If a wife *knows* her husband has a drinking problem, she should seek information and counsel in order to find and take part in the programs best designed for her and her needs.

Regardless of the kind of help the wife chooses she should not stop after a few conferences or meetings, because changes do not occur overnight. Regular attendance should be continued for months, or even a year or so, for many wives state that it takes them this long to secure the real benefit from a program. This may not seem fair to the wife, but in our present society she has one basic choice—to seek help for herself or permit the illness of alcoholism to destroy her, other members of the family, and perhaps her marriage.

Al-Anon is the most widespread group resource for the family today, just as Alcoholics Anonymous is the most readily available help for the alcoholic. Each have several thousand groups throughout the United States and Canada. In many communities there are also alcoholism information centres, mental health centres, and professional people who have learned enough about alcoholism to give good professional counsel to the family. If she makes a real search, the wife can find a source of help for herself—the only effective method if she is to break the merry-go-round of denial during the early period of alcoholism.

Once help is found, the family member must continue to use whatever help is available and build her own program of recovery, preferably within an established group. Starting a recovery program may cause greater suffering, conflict, and confusion initially, but in the long run it will be far less painful than helping the alcoholic continue to drink by remaining a member of the supporting cast of the play that keeps the merry-go-round turning.

For those who may wish to structure the merry-go-round with the wife as the alcoholic, the process is quite simple. In the second act, all three supporting roles are played by the husband. If he wants his wife to recover, he must change all three roles. To do this, he needs more help than does the wife of the alcoholic husband. He will probably deny that he needs help—but, after all, that is to be expected: the name of the play is *Denial*.

Here are four simple guidelines to aid the family of the alcoholic:

1. Secure additional alcoholism literature for your own study.
2. Seek out all professional alcoholism services in your community. Use whatever is available for the family, and know what is available for the alcoholic.
3. Attend Al-Anon regularly in addition to using professional services. If Al-Anon is not available, attend open meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.
4. Remember that the family may either help keep the illness going or start the recovery process. The family should work towards recovery by starting and continuing a change in their roles in the drama of alcoholism.

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